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MEASURING AND MONITORING ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

The implications for statistics of the World Summit for Social Development

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the Statistical Commission the report of the Central Statistical Office of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland on the implications for statistics of the World Summit for Social Development, which is contained in the annex. The report is transmitted to the Commission in accordance with a request of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination at its seventeenth session (E/CN.3/1995/2, para. 61).

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Annex

REPORT OF THE CENTRAL STATISTICAL OFFICE OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND ON THE IMPLICATIONS FOR STATISTICS OF THE WORLD SUMMIT FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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INTRODUCTION

1. As the twenty-eighth session of the Statistical Commission draws to a close, heads of State and Governments will be gathering in Copenhagen to take part in the first ever World Summit for Social Development. The aim of the Summit is to address the profound social problems - especially poverty, unemployment and social exclusion - that affect every country.

2. What are likely to be the implications of the World Summit for the statistical community? Each country's social development goals and agenda for achieving those goals will be different. Each statistical service will be responsible for developing and implementing the statistical tools required for monitoring and evaluating progress towards those goals. It is not the aim of the present report to address the issues that the Social Summit will pose for statisticians at the national level; rather, it aims to suggest areas for action at the international level.

3. One of the suggested elements of implementation and follow-up action is that international support for the formulation of national strategies for social development, in order to facilitate monitoring and policy analysis, should include bilateral and multilateral agencies taking action to develop improved concepts and programmes for the collection and dissemination of social statistics and indicators. More specifically there is a need to strengthen the capacity of the United Nations system for gathering and analysing information and developing indicators of social development which would clearly involve the participation of the Statistical Commission.

4. This development comes at a time of revived interest in the development of social statistics in a number of forums, such as the Sienna Group, which met for the first time in June 1994 to discuss the state of the art in social statistics and to set an agenda for future action, mainly in a European context.

5. International action is appropriate either when it can provide value added for individual Member States in setting their own work programmes or where there is a need to monitor developments world wide. Before considering the particular implications of the World Summit, it may be useful to consider what has characterized successful international action on statistics in the past in order to identify the areas on which it would be most worthwhile for the Statistical Commission to concentrate.

6. Action seems to have been most productive in the following areas:

(a) Systems of classification and definition, particularly where there is a clear requirement by users for international comparisons (for example, the International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities (ISIC), the System of National Accounts (SNA), and the definitions of employment and unemployment developed by the International Labour Organization (ILO));

(b) Collation and dissemination of statistics required for international comparison (for example, statistical compendia, such as The World's Women 1970-1990: Trends and Statistics); a/

(c) Development and dissemination of methodological material in order to avoid countries having to recreate such material from scratch (for example, United Nations handbooks on household surveys, price indices and other subjects).

7. It is against this background that the themes below are described. They are not developed in any depth; the Statistical Commission is not the right forum for that. However, participants are requested to express their views on which of the themes should be followed up over the next two years and how that might be accomplished.

I. KEY THEMES FOR CONSIDERATION BY THE STATISTICAL COMMISSION

8. The declaration and programme of action of the World Summit for Social Development are of course not yet finalized. However, in the draft declaration and programme of action (A/CONF.166/PC/L.13, annex), the table of contents to which is contained in the appendix to the present report, it is already possible to identify a number of key areas for development. The background for each of those key areas is described in sections III to IX below.

9. The suggested areas for development and action are:

(a) Research into the feasibility of constructing a broad statistical framework to reflect the multidimensional nature of poverty;

(b) Development of classifications and survey methodology for measuring time use;

(c) Increased development and exploitation of longitudinal surveys, and sharing of best practice;

(d) Development of guidelines on methodology for the collection of attitudinal data;

(e) Development of an internationally comparable definition of the family as a unit of analysis;

(f) Extension of the approach of The World's Women to the statistics of other vulnerable groups;

(g) Giving higher priority to the development of social statistics in technical cooperation programmes.

10. Such actions may be advanced by, inter alia, the establishment of expert groups to share experience and develop guidelines for use by countries; the commissioning of methodological research to benefit United Nations Member States; the introduction of new publications; and the inclusion of some of the above-mentioned topics in the work programmes of the Statistical Division of the United Nations Secretariat (UNSTAT) and/or the specialized agencies or other relevant bodies.

II. SOCIAL INDICATORS: CAN THEY BE REVIVED?

11. The draft programme of action calls attention to the need for:

(a) Developing and disseminating indicators of poverty and vulnerability, including indicators of income, hunger, malnutrition, health, homelessness and other factors, as well as indicators of the causal factors underlying poverty;

(b) Strengthening labour-market systems; developing appropriate data and indicators on employment and unemployment, and sharing information concerning labour markets, including work situations outside formal markets.

12. It is tempting to conclude that the response to the above-mentioned requirements should be to revive the work of the social indicators movement of the 1970s. But would that be productive? What can be learned from the past?

13. Social indicators have not on the whole had a successful history. The United Nations issued guidelines on social indicators b/ in 1978, while the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) issued The OECD List of Social Indicators c/ in 1982. However, the OECD Social Indicators Programme experienced enormous difficulty in reaching a consensus on the choice of indicators, and the comprehensive survey which was its logical conclusion was never initiated, although similar surveys were set up in a number of countries and many countries currently publish social indicators according to national needs. The concept of compiling internationally comparable social indicators has recently been revived by the Statistical Office of the European Community (Eurostat) for the European Union (EU). But to contemplate a world-wide initiative of that kind would be unrealistic because such an initiative would be both impractical and expensive.

14. There may be a case, however, for revisiting some of the issues addressed by the social indicators movement of the 1970s: the two policy areas mentioned in paragraph 11 above that the draft programme of action indicates have a need for the development of indicators could provide a focus for exploring where international action might be fruitful.

III. ERADICATION OF POVERTY

15. Despite an enormous amount of research and literature generated over many years, the definition and measurement of poverty remains an area of contention and continued debate. The draft declaration clarifies the multidimensional nature of poverty, but even in the narrow confines of income distribution measurement there is no consensus on precise concepts and definitions. Thus, even when statistics are published that purport to have international comparability, the user has only to examine the detail of national sources and methods to find that that comparability is only superficial.

16. Should the international statistical community accept that it is impossible to produce internationally comparable income distribution statistics? In other words, should it accept that income poverty can only be defined in national terms against the background of national concepts and definitions?

17. Should effort instead be directed to developing a more wide-ranging framework that takes into account the multidimensional nature of poverty? Such a framework would need to measure deprivation of the components of well-being, such as sufficient food, good health and adequate shelter, but should also extend to measuring the risk of suffering such deprivation by including measures of vulnerability. And it would have to be people-based, which would argue for concentration on direct measures of social conditions and of outcomes. However, the draft declaration also calls for developing indicators of the causal factors underlying poverty, which would involve supplementing such direct measures with measures of the circumstances and factors that influence deprivation and vulnerability.

18. But the history of attempts to construct such all-embracing frameworks of social statistics is not an encouraging one. It might be instructive to try to analyse why the publication Towards a System of Social and Demographic Statistics, d/ although it is almost universally acknowledged as a brilliant pioneering report, has had so little impact on social statistics as we know them today. Was its approach just too complex? Or was it a lack of basic statistics that hampered its practical development? Whatever the reasons, it is important that any future work in developing such frameworks should take full account of the practicability of implementation in countries at all stages of statistical development.

IV. PRODUCTIVE EMPLOYMENT AND THE REDUCTION OF UNEMPLOYMENT

19. It can be argued with some justification that as a result of the work of the United Nations on systems of classification, concepts and definitions, and methodology, in particular the work of the ILO, much of the framework already exists for providing policy makers and other users with the tools that they will need to measure progress towards the labour-market goals contained in the draft programme of action.

20. At least the framework exists in relation to paid employment in the formal sector. But the draft programme of action also indicates that there is much productive work of great social importance that is not remunerated and that efforts are needed to facilitate the combination of such work with formal economic life through flexible working arrangements, thus broadening the very concept of productive work and employment and in fact altering the production boundary. The issues involved here are not simply of a technical nature but raise fundamental questions of economic theory and principles. They have been a focus of the Inter-Secretariat Working Group on National Accounts throughout its deliberations and continue to be on the research agenda of the ILO. If the draft programme of action is adopted, it is likely to give added impetus to this work. Irrespective of whether the production boundary is eventually shifted, however, it seems certain that there will be a growing demand to supplement measures of activity in the formal labour market with broader-based measures.

21. It is generally recognized that the valuation of work currently regarded as non-market requires the collection and analysis of time-use data. Indeed, it can be argued that the move towards more flexible work patterns, even in the

formal labour market, means that traditional methods for measuring employment and hours of work will be less able to provide an accurate picture of activity.

22. Within the developed countries, a considerable amount of research and development work has been carried out into the design and analysis of time-use data. Such applications are equally relevant for developing countries, in which the informal-formal distinction is of greater importance.

23. Moreover, time-use data have many applications beyond the measurement of work; they may also throw light on gender issues and on social interaction and integration.

V. MEASURING CHANGE

24. Social development means social change, so that to measure progress towards social development goals means to measure such change over time. But social statistics, whether derived from surveys or from administrative records, do not have a good reputation for reliability in the measurement of change. Time-series analysis can be complicated by changes in definition and classification: many surveys are of an ad hoc nature and even when surveys are continuous, the drive to make improvements may result in discontinuities.

25. There are inherent problems in the use of cross-sectional data for time-series analysis. For example, although the proportion of people with incomes below a particular threshold may be an important social statistic, the interpretation of changes over time in such a statistic may vary considerably, depending on whether the same people fall into that category over a period of years, that is, depending on whether low income is a transient or persistent phenomenon. Such considerations are leading countries to look towards the added dimension that longitudinal surveys can provide.

26. The measurement of social variables over time has for many years been a key element in the monitoring and evaluation of development projects, in which a baseline survey establishes the situation before developmental inputs, progress is monitored through follow-up surveys and further data collection takes place to assess the project's overall impact. A cohort approach is often at least attempted.

27. Such surveys tend to be the province of the social researcher rather than the statistician: they are designed to provide information on a small geographic area or for a particular group of people rather than to provide nationally representative information. But perhaps that approach needs to be re-examined by national statistical services to see what lessons it may have to offer.

VI. FACTS VERSUS PERCEPTIONS

28. The starting-point of the OECD Social Indicators Programme was the concept of social well-being. It can be argued that such a concept is as much subjective as it is objective. Yet, of the 33 indicators in the final list of the Programme, only one was subjective - fear for personal safety.

29. National statistical services have generally shied away from collecting data on social attitudes; the attitudinal data that exist are generally collected by market researchers or other private institutions. In contrast, information collected from businesses about perceptions of their economic prospects is in many countries the responsibility of the national statistical service.

30. Social statisticians seem to have balked at the idea of gathering data by asking such questions as "Do you feel poor?" Such statistics are usually regarded as "soft" and therefore of less value than "hard" data on the cash income available to an individual. The result is that there has been little international debate about frameworks, definitions and methodology for collecting attitudinal data. Yet accepting that subjective measurement can usefully supplement objective measurement might enable indicators to be constructed that are less vulnerable to cultural and developmental differences among countries. It would also help prevent the value judgements of those collecting the statistics from influencing the choice of indicators.

VII. THE FAMILY AS A UNIT OF MEASUREMENT

31. The three basic units of measurement in social statistics are the household, the family and the individual. There is little scope for different definitions of an individual and much work has been done by the United Nations and others to define the household. However, it is the family that the draft declaration suggests should be the basic unit of society, and much less work has been done to research an internationally operational way of designing a typography for the family that could be used for statistical purposes.

VIII. SOCIAL REPORTING

32. The United Nations has had considerable success with the publication of The World's Women and there have been similar publications in the past on other social groups, such as children and youth. There is no doubt that such publications provide a very powerful way of presenting the situation of vulnerable groups in the population. Why not develop a permanent publication programme to cover these and other groups, such as indigenous people as minority groups, the disabled and the elderly?

IX. THE NEED FOR TECHNICAL COOPERATION

33. The themes suggested above are ones in which all members of the Statistical Commission have a shared interest. However, throughout the draft declaration and programme of action there is a recognition of the special needs for social development that exist in the least developed countries. It is true to say that the emphasis on economic development of the last 50 years has inevitably led to priority being given to the development of economic rather than social statistics, particularly in those countries. In recent years, the multilateral agencies have paid greater attention to the need for social data in initiatives such as the United Nations National Household Survey Capability Programme and the World Bank Social Dimensions of Adjustment Programme and Living Standards Measurement Study; the bilateral agencies have done so only to a limited extent. The draft programme of action implies a need to place greater emphasis in the future on social statistics so as to support social development policies.

34. Technical cooperation is important but it is not sufficient; statistical development programmes also require resources to enable their implementation. The international community needs to consider how the costs of data collection can be supported during the initial stages of any programme so as to ensure its sustainability.

Notes

a/ Statistical Papers, Series K, No. 8 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.90.XVII.3).

b/ Social Indicators: Preliminary Guidelines and Illustrative Series, Statistical Papers, Series M, No. 63 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.78.XVII.8).

c/ Paris, OECD, 1982.

d/ Statistical Papers, Series F, No. 18 (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.74.XVII.8).

Appendix

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a/ See A/CONF.166/PC/L.13, annex.